

Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq

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Thank you for giving me the podium to share local accounts that I was entrusted with as an academic engaged in fieldwork in Iraq since 2007. My career has been dedicated to the study of Iraq's modern history, including that of its minoritized ethno-religious and native communities. I also serve as research director of a cultural heritage preservation project that has been running since 2020 with USAID funding, focusing on religious minorities in the region.

In June 2023 I was in Iraq conducting research for my second book project, on Alqosh and its market. Alqosh, nestled between Mosul and Duhok, is one of Iraq's most ancient towns, home to the majestic seventh-century Monastery of Rabban Hermizd, and to the shrine of prophet Nahoum, who is revered by Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. Alqosh was a "Vatican" of Eastern Christianity, having housed the Patriarchal See of the Church of the East for 400 years. This ancient church adopted Christianity in the first century, and spread the faith to China, India, and of course Mesopotamia, or modern Iraq. What drew me to Alqosh as a historian was its multilingual bazaar and the intricate links between its communities, which have preserved cultural traditions and provided a model of coexistence—reminding us of an Iraq that once was and still can be pluralistic.

How can we ensure that Iraq's rich ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity persists? Might the relatively successful coexistence that is reflected throughout my academic investigations of the past remain a reality and a treasure to be passed on to future generations?

In my presentation, I want to focus on two factors from which Iraq's minorities, and particularly the Christian community, suffer grievously: loss of property, and lack of real representation.

First, is the question of land. In Baghdad, as well as central and southern parts of Iraq, since 2003, the community has lost property in the form of houses—most recently to Iran-backed militias. At times, these families are threatened to leave before their homes are confiscated. In the KRG, the loss or confiscation of agricultural land has a longer history, which goes back either to displacements caused by conflict stemming from the civil war that began in 1961, or to government attacks and forced displacements of northern communities—Kurds, Assyrians, Yezidis, and others—in the 1970s and 1980s. In these cases, many villagers returned after 1991 to the newly established safe-haven, which later became the KRG, to see that their villages or lands had been taken by neighboring or more powerful tribes. In Duhok alone, research has documented 76 separate cases of land-grabs in 58 villages—out of the 95 villages and sub-districts, plus the city center of Duhok, where Christians reside. Many of these cases were legally

investigated or recorded, and some were tried in KRG courts. Some have in fact been won by the Assyrians, but are still awaiting implementation. For example, in a village in the district of Zakho, Duhok, more than 1200 dunam (nearly 750 acres) were confiscated by an influential Kurd. The KRG court ordered him in 2011 to return it within a year. The order is now 11 years old, but remains unimplemented.

In Barwari, Duhok, seven villages were repopulated by Christians in 2006–2007, following their displacement from them in the 1960s and 1970s. This return was a response to violent sectarian conflict in Baghdad and the other urban centers where they had settled in the intervening years. They were nonetheless forced to leave once again due to Turkish attacks on the PKK in and around their villages. Similar events have been unfolding in the Nahla Valley, also affecting Yezidis in their areas. In what is a familiar pattern for minority groups, they have routinely become victims of local, regional, and even international conflicts.

Recently oil is believed to have been discovered in the Assyrian village Sawora ‘Aeleta (Arabic: Saphra al-Gharbiyya). Meanwhile, another, larger Kurdish tribe now claims this village as its own. Such claims are typical in Nahla and many other neighboring districts. For a couple of years, the village elders have asked the Ministry of Agriculture’s Land Department in Duhok to reissue their land deeds, which were burned along with their property in the 1980s—but to no avail. They are also going back and forth between the central and regional governments to negotiate what is theirs. It is their word against that of the other, more powerful tribe, in a time when non-state-controlled entities, including militias, have accrued more power, while the Christian community lacks any effective political representation. As a result of the massive and rapid displacement of Christian populations, they have experienced a broad weakening of their networks and economic resources. In the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, around 20% of the community remains, their numbers having dwindled from 1.5 million to 300,000 or so.

Second, the role of political representation continues to be central to the welfare of these fragile communities. Areas heavily populated by native and minority communities along the KRG border, though officially administered prior to 2003 by Mosul, were contested by the regional and central governments. Nonetheless, locals preferred their own administration. Article 125 of the new Iraqi Constitution designated some of these areas as eligible for local administration on matters related to education, healthcare, and civil services, with a designated budget for each element, while also ensuring political representation. However, expansionist agendas, especially given the discovery of oil in these areas, made them targets for co-optation by the KRG, which channeled funds to perceived loyalists within the community.¹ More directly coercive methods included preventing ballot boxes from reaching contested territories. In recent years the Iran-backed militias have expanded this form of co-optation by overwhelming the minority quota system with their own loyalists elected outside the terms of the quotas. The Babylon Brigade today holds most of the seats for the Christian quota—though most community members and religious and political leaders do not view them as their legitimate representatives. The votes this group has garnered come from non-Christian areas.

¹ Alda Benjamen, “Assyrians in Iraq’s Nineveh Plains: Grassroot Organizations and Inter-Communal Conflict,” *American Academic Research Institute in Iraq* 6: 1 (Spring 2011): 13–20.

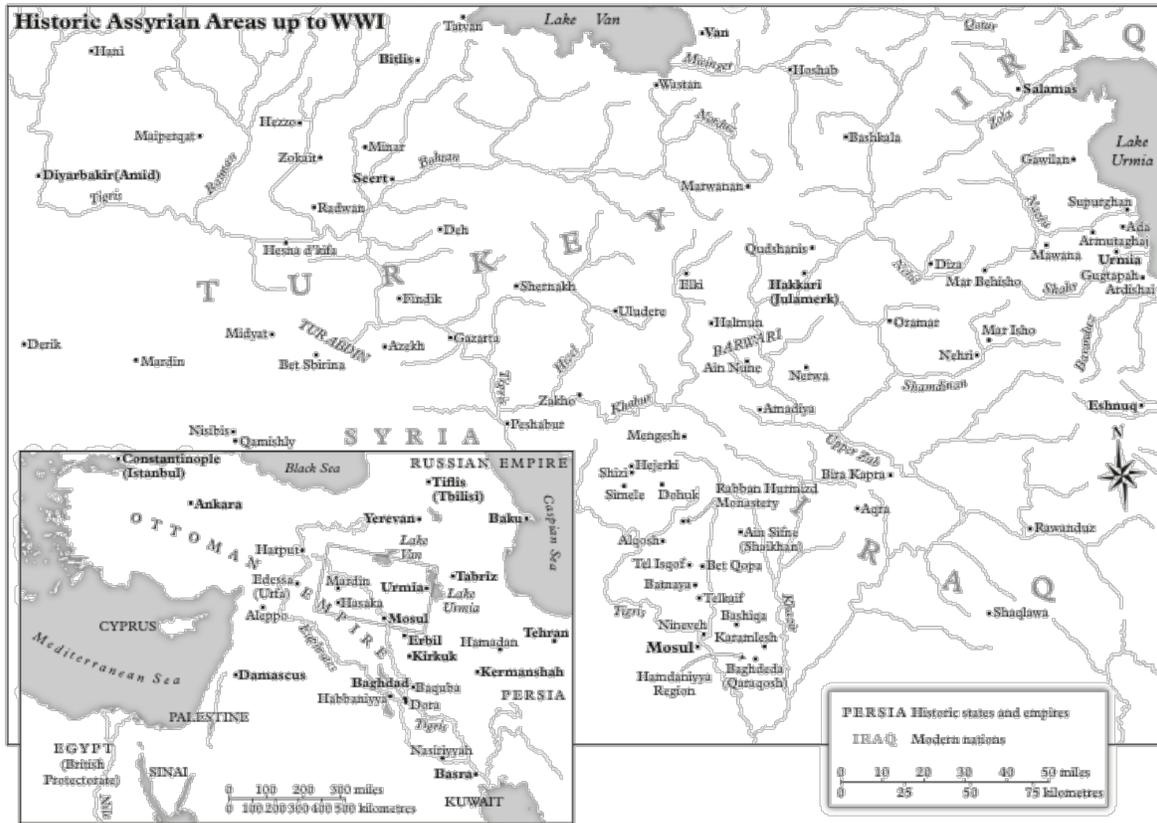
When communities do not have a voice, especially in contested areas, it severely impacts their civil and health services, which are already substandard in rural areas. This was manifested most recently in the Baghdeda wedding fire. Requests had been made for improved local services, including expanded healthcare, in this town since at least 2007, when I first visited. But Baghdeda's contested status meant that these issues could not be decided by locals. Larger political groups in oil-rich minority areas controlled resources, security, and the political situation. The wedding tragedy was a product of underlying systemic issues representative of what Iraqis face everywhere: bad construction, lack of effective safety regulation, and inadequate healthcare. However, in smaller provincial towns with poorer services and local conflicts of political interest, these problems are only compounded.

Another example of the complicated nature of life for minorities in the Nineveh Plain is in Telesqop—a town under KRG control, but close to Batnaya, which is under the control of the Iraq government and several militias. The villagers' access to their agricultural lands is cut off by checkpoints between the KRG, the Iraqi authorities, and the militias. Instead of what would otherwise be a five-minute drive to their lands, they endure a series of checkpoints for a journey of over two hours. A woman recently died in an ambulance on her way to the hospital. Deaths are reported frequently within minority communities living on the outskirts of the provincial areas I am discussing, on the commute along major highways between two urban centers—Mosul to Erbil, and Duhok to Mosul. In both cases, two 7km exits, leading to Baghdeda and Bakhitma respectively, still stand uncompleted. Had the local communities had control over budgets relating to infrastructure, education, and healthcare, things could now be different.

Though some constitutional articles need to be revisited to ensure that all Iraqis are treated equally, the implementation of Article 125, relating to local administration and other rights, could benefit minorities in provincial areas by elevating their concerns on questions of local governance and administration. Religious and secular leaders have long been pressing for an amendment to the electoral law that would ensure that only quota members would be able to vote for candidates within the quota system. This was indeed the case in the first KRG elections, in 1992.

Legislation to protect land rights and political representation would constitute a step in the right direction, providing a basis for the survival of cultural and religious diversity. The history of this coexistence should be documented and passed on to new generations, notably in school curricula. More broadly it should also be preserved, in both its tangible and intangible forms, including languages and dialects that reflect our shared global heritage. By elevating the communities' demands in these areas, the human and cultural rights of all those in the country and wider region will be advanced, not just their own.

Historic Assyrian Areas Prior to World War I



Map from Alda Benjamen, *Assyrians in Modern Iraq: Negotiating Political and Cultural Space* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 8–9.